

Exploring the flow state in professional jump jockeys: Content and connecting analyses

Patricia Jackman^{1,2}, Gerry Fitzpatrick² and Aoife Lane²

1. School of Sport and Exercise Science, University of Lincoln, UK

2. Department of Health, Sport and Exercise Science, Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland



Introduction

Flow is an intrinsically rewarding psychological state associated with enhanced task concentration, automaticity and enjoyable performances (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999).

Thompson and Nesci (2013) suggest that moments of feeling ‘at one’ with an equine partner may contribute to superior and distinct flow experiences.

With the existence of a unique interspecies partnership in horse racing and a recent call for inductive explorations of flow in various sports (Swann, Crust, Keegan, Piggott, & Hemmings, 2015), the aim of the study was to explore; (A) the characteristics of flow; (B) influencing conditions of flow; and (C) connections between the conditions and characteristics of flow in National Hunt (jump) horse racing.



Method

Ten male professional jump jockeys (*M* age = 28.1 years, *SD* ± 5.21; *M* career length = 11.6 years, *SD* ± 5.06), all of whom had ridden at Graded level, participated in the study.

Semi-structured **interviews** (*M* length = 45.12 minutes) were conducted comprising five distinct sections: (a) background and career history, (b) description of flow, (c) flow facilitation, (d) flow inhibition and (e) flow disruption.

Content analysis was undertaken to assess the characteristics of flow and the conditions that influenced flow. A **connecting analysis** (Maxwell, 2012) searched for links between these characteristics and conditions. Processes of critical reflection, consensus validation and peer review took place to increase transparency and **trustworthiness**.



Connections

A total of thirty-five connections emerged between the conditions and characteristics of flow through which confidence, concentration and optimal interaction with the horse were more influential (Figure 1).

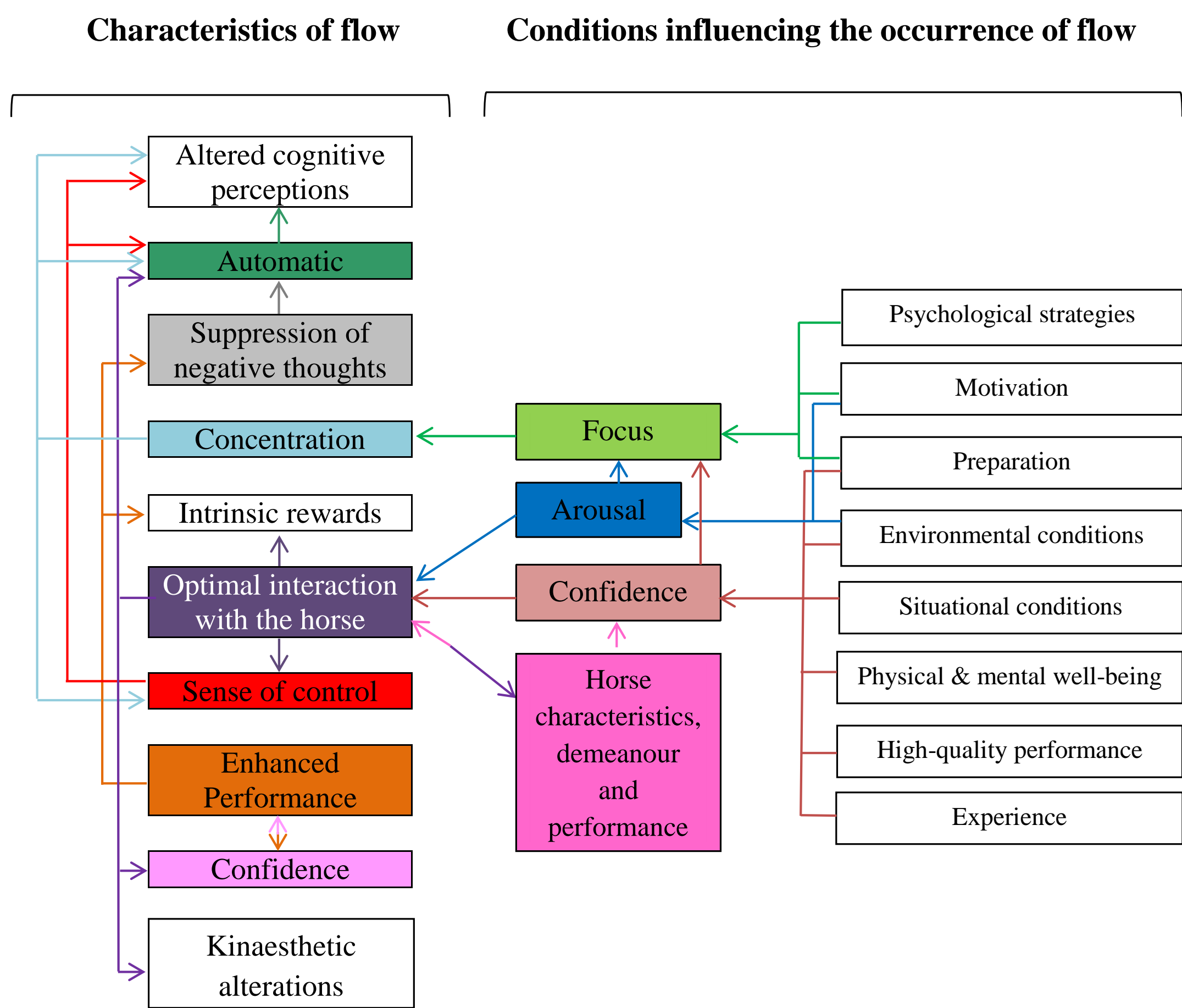


Figure 1: Connections between the conditions and characteristics of flow

Discussion

Although similarities exist between the findings and previous explorations of flow in elite athletes in sport, the influence of the horse on jockey flow experiences emerged as a novel influence in jump jockeys.

Similar to recent research in sport (e.g. Chavez, 2008), the emergence of kinaesthetic alterations strengthens the suggestion that an extension of flow characteristics in sport may be warranted (Swann et al., 2015).

The connecting analysis provided a unique method to understanding the mechanisms underpinning flow in horse racing and displayed cohesion between the conditions and characteristics of flow. Both horse and jockey independently influenced the attainment of the optimal relationship between both parties and had the capacity to subsequently influence their partner’s performance.

Results

Characteristics

Ten characteristics of the state emerged through content analysis (Table 1).

Table 1: Characteristics of flow

Optimal interaction with the horse (10)
Kinaesthetic alterations (10)
Confidence (10)
Automaticity (10)
Enhanced performance (10)
Intrinsic rewards (10)
Concentration (8)
Altered cognitive perceptions (7)
Sense of control (6)
Suppression of negative thoughts (6)

Higher-order themes for the optimal interaction with the horse included;

- Confidence
- Relaxed
- Jumping in sync
- Galloping harmony
- Enhancement in tactile sensitivity
- Merging as one

Higher-order themes for the kinaesthetic alterations included;

- Heightening of sensual perceptions
- Feeling of alertness
- Relaxed
- Feeling of lightness
- Altered kinaesthetic perceptions of horse

Conditions

Twelve facilitative, ten inhibitive and seven disruptive conditions influenced flow in this sample of jump jockeys.

Table 2: Conditions influencing flow

Facilitators	Inhibitors	Disruptors
Favourable horse demeanour, characteristics and performance (10)	Non-optimal horse demeanour, characteristics and performance (10)	Horse performance disrupted (6)
Confidence (10)	Lack of confidence (10)	Loss of confidence (5)
High-quality performance (10)	Negative performance feedback (10)	Performance problems (5)
Focus (8)	Compromised focus (5)	Over-thinking (3)
Optimal situational conditions (8)	Non-optimal situational conditions (5)	
Tactical preparation (7)		Impeded by competitor (5)
High motivation (7)	Non-optimal motivation (3)	
Optimal arousal (7)	Non-optimal arousal (4)	
Psychological strategies (5)		
Experience (5)	Lack of experience (3)	
Optimal environmental conditions (5)		
Physical and mental well-being (3)	Non-optimal physical and mental well-being (3)	Physical problems (2)
	Non-optimal relationship between horse and jockey (7)	Loss of optimal relationship between horse and jockey (3)

References

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